DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 781 FL 020 252

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TITLE Discursive Aspects of Metafiction: A Neo-Oral Aura?
REPORT NO ISSN-0959-2253
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 14p.; For serial issue in which this paper appears, see FL 020 251.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Linguistics; n2 p1-13 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Foreign Countries; Interaction; *Interpersonal Communication; *Oral Language
IDENTIFIERS *Metafiction

ABSTRACT

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DISCURSIVE ASPECTS OF METAFICTION: A NEO-ORAL AURA?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to identify certain regularities and tendencies of metafictional discourse. The focus is on the aspects of its metacommunicative component, which refers to the interpersonal relations between the interactants of the narrative. What is interesting is the incorporation of typically oral modes of involvement in the self-conscious texts. The metafictional on-going and cooperative discourse draws on oral interaction devices in order to achieve its immediate and 'involvement-focused' character. In addition to this, it makes them expand into new discursive forms and functions in order to serve its inward reflexivity. Having placed emphasis on how this is done, the discussion will attach the metafictional interaction to the orality/literacy issue: Can this interaction be accounted for in terms of a neo-oral cast or is it a further argument for the treatment of the oral and literate strategies as a continuum instead of clear-cut categories?

1. Introduction

Reflexivity and self-awareness characterize all art forms in the latter half of this century. In literature, the narcissistic turning of art upon its own processes is realized in the realm of the metafictional narrative. Defined as "fiction about fiction, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (Hutcheon, 1984.1), metafiction lays bare one by one the conventions of fiction-making and transcends them by demonstrating their artificiality. The texture of the metafictional sujet[1] with its intense linguistic and diegetic[2] self-consciousness inevitably affects the interpersonal relations in the communicative circuit of the narrative: Addresser-Text-Addressee.

The following discussion adopts as its starting point the view that metafictional texts radically liberate the reader by assigning her the role of an active participant and co-producer of the fictive universe instead of that of a passive consumer.[3] Building on this, the discussion will attempt to investigate certain highly interactive and audience-oriented devices of the metafictional discourse in relation to the oral modality. More specifically, it will suggest that the metafictional means of promoting the reader's involvement with the text (for the use of the term see Chafe in Tannen, 1982: 35-53)[4] are modelled on face- to-face interaction conventions. In addition to this, emphasis will be placed on how these involvement modes are recodified because of their recontextualization in persistently self- conscious texts.

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2. Direct address in metafiction

The "Dear Reader" invocation, which is exploited as the *par excellence* 'involvement-focused' device in metafiction (the term used by Tannen in Olson, 1985: 130) primarily applies to an on- going face-to-face interaction, for easily identifiable reasons: it presupposes a present recipient who shares the same spatiotemporal context with the addresser and can actively participate in the process of storytelling; it breaks the narrative flow and establishes the 'apostrophic time' (Culler 1981: 149) which coincides with the actual time-level of the storytelling.

Suspending the narration to create the effect of immediacy is inextricably bound with oral situations. Metafiction draws on these features of Direct Address (DA) in order to promote the reader's involvement. The reader is invited into the text- "Come along with me, reader, and don't fear for your weak heart" (Barthelme, 1956) - as a co-producer: "Reader, we have roles to play, thou and I" (Barthelme, 1961). In this case, writing becomes "a different name for conversation" (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, in Anderson (ed) 1980: 77) which, pragmatically put, could mean that the heavy use of DA in metafiction constitutes a flouting of the unmarked generic norms of written narrative. In such instances, the reader decodes the communicative intentions behind the use of DA by drawing implicatures (for the pragmatics of literary discourse, see Pratt, 1977).

The prevailing element in the linguistic composition of DA is the pronoun "you". The choice is meaningful for both linguistic and semiological reasons. "You" always presupposes an "I" and this is the essence of its relational potential: it signifies a transaction. It is only within a discourse that it assumes significance since it lacks the standardized meaning of other linguistic terms. The fact that it is an empty signifier, whose precise referent is recoverable only from the communica-tive act in which it occurs, facilitates the reader's identification with it. The reader can project herself in the gap opened in the discourse by "you". This is an essential act because it results in the creation of the 'spoken subject' (Silverman, 1983:47), which is the reader's subjectivity as defined by the Audience- image promoted by the text.[5]

The linguistic make-up of DA can comprise, apart from "you", elements such as: intimate vocatives (e.g."good folks", "my dear friend and companion" in Sterne, op.cit., "dear reader" in Coover, 1971, "Lecteur/interlocutor" in Brophy, 1969 etc.), and phatic elements (e.g. tag questions and other 'involvement markers' such as questions, imperatives, use of "we", "us", "ours", etc. McIntosh, 1963 as quoted in Montgomery, 1988: 192). They all stress the atmosphere of friendship and intimacy with the reader. They also serve the basic aim of apostrophes which is to simulate co-presence with the metafictional addressee (ibid.: 193).

Deixis is another device for the accomplishment of this aim. References to the context of immediate surroundings visible to both writer and reader feign deictic simultaneity (the here and now of the addresser coinciding with that of the addressee). This aims at mitigating the decontextualization (situational autonomy) of metafictional texts, which share the participation framework of all written texts (detachment of the addresser from the addressee:

> Look, I'm writing. No, listen, I'm nothing but talk.
>
> (Barth, 1968: 38)

Here the simulation of co-presence is corroborated by reference to the oral modality as the one of immediate communication: cf. "You who listen give me life in a manner of speaking" (ibid.: 35).

> Look, the index finger on my right hand is missing. Look: through the rip in my cape you can see a vermilion tattoo on my stomach...The system was elementary, as you can see.
>
> (Borges, 1964: 72)

There are cases, however, where metafictionists do not conceal their awareness of their distance from the readers:

> Trust me, not knowing me. I trust you, not knowing you.
>
> (Johnson, 1975: 127)

> If you are not an acquaintance of mine (which you are almost pleased not to be) her name can mean nothing to you.
>
> (ibid.: 83)

> ...besides Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once.
>
> (Sterne, op.cit: 6)

> Who you are, reader, your age, your status, profession, income, that would be indiscreet to ask.
>
> (Calvino, 1979: 30).

There is another side though from which one can look at the above examples. Omitting any defining characteristics of the encoded reader or 'narratee' (Prince, 1980: 7ff.) is also related to the facilitation of the reader's identification with him/her (see above). This is exactly the case with Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (see last quotation above) which is one of the mot striking metafictional examples of (over-) encoding the reader in order to promote the extratextual reader's engagement in the text.

2.1 Metacommunication

The term 'metacommunication' refers to any element of communication which calls attention to the interpersonal relations that obtain between the addresser and the addressee of a speech event (Babcock in Bauman, 1977: 66).[6] In metafiction it is a particularly powerful component of the narrative. The narrators consistently foreground the text's discursive situation. Their interest in the dynamics of the texts' interactive powers shapes their stance. In principle, they do not efface the signs of their presence by letting the events recount themselves. On the contrary, they consciously contextualize storytelling. They reach out to the audience like oral performers and attempt to establish a strong interpersonal involvement based on dialogue and participatory immediacy. The promotion of an atmosphere of *camaraderie* with the readers is part of this policy. Pleas for communication and sympathy are frequent here:

> As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning between us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault will terminate in friendship. ... Therefore, my dear friend and companion,...bear with me, and let me go on,...or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road...don't fly off, but

> rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside; and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing, only keep your temper.
>
> (Sterne, op.cit.: 6-7)

> Will you share my dual? Come pair with me, and we shall be inseparably paradigmed in the syntax of love.
>
> (Brophy, 1969: 43)

Here, the narrator refers to the dual number to express her unique love relationship with the "interlocutor". Throughout the thoroughly apostrophic *In Transit* the narrator pleads for the reader's sympathy:

> I want, though I may fail to win, your sympathy for me as narrator as well as character...constantly, therefore I have invited you to inspect and (I hope) concur in the machinery of my narration (66)... Pray you, Reader, read on (67)... I fear I shall lose whatever little I have of your affection. ...Yet don't leave me (87).

The end of the novel dramatizes the narcissistic text's need for the love of the readers, because, as Barth puts it, "Narcissus thirsts for love" (1968: 102):

> Love of You has, I mean to say, decided me to live...I desire You to locute to me. (235)

The principle which seems to govern the structuring of the metacommunicative component in self-conscious texts is that "the truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding is to halve the matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn" (Sterne, idem: 77). Therefore, the reader is constantly prodded into action. Numerous micro- and macrolevel devices drag her into the text. She is forced to give harmony and unity to multipolar and fragmentary texts (see Borges's aleatory structures, Robbe-Grillet's textual labyrinths, Brooke-Rose's fragments, Sorrentino's, Sukenick's and Barthelme's - to mention only a few - metafictional collage etc.); or invited to choose between different endings (e.g. Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*) and different structural designs. For example, in Cortazar's *Hopscotch* the reader is free to choose between reading the story in a traditionally linear fashion or skipping from chapter to chapter and going back and forth. In Federman's *Take It Or Leave It* she can read the unnumbered pages in any order she likes, and in Saporta's *Composition 1* she may shuffle the pages of the novel exactly as if she were playing with a deck of cards and then read it according to the resulting order.

The negotiated and interactive nature of the metafictional discourse can also be traced in microlevel instances of bringing the reader into the middle, frequently as an evaluator of various components of the narrative:

> Did you find the bubble bit interesting?...or perhaps you were embarrassed? In that case it may have been good for you?...
>
> (Johnson, 1975: 86)

> I could of course have worked it in another way...but surely you would rather have it straight as it happens, as it occurs to me?
>
> (ibid.: 29)

One of the most striking examples of this case is Barthelme's questionnaire at the end of Part One of *Snow White*, where the reader is invited to answer fifteen questions related to the narrative :

e.g. Do you like the story so far?

Yes ( ) No ( )

Is there too much blague in the narration? ( )

Not enough blague? ( )

Notice the manipulation of the page to get the readers to immediately respond as a real audience would do.

Encoding the readers' attitudes or response to the storytelling is another way of bringing them into the narrative situation:

e.g. Sir! The point! To the point!

The point! Where is your point?

You still haven't come to the point.

(Johnson ibid.: 125).

What? Does the fellow know what he is talking about?

Competing with Sterne, indeed! (Johnson ibid.: 118)

The intratextual readers' response naturally is intended to activate the extratextual readers'. This network of devices by which metafictionists shift out of the narrative to refer to the audience as participants of the storytelling event are adjusted from oral modes of narration where the audience provides the storyteller with constant feedback and allows him/her to monitor his/her performance (for challenges to the storyteller called entitlement, or to the storytelling itself in oral contexts, see Shuman 1986: esp. 29-36).

Another identifiable tendency in the conveying of the metafictional metacommunication, or alternatively of metastatements (statements which communicate something about the relationship between addresser and addressee - for a discussion see Bateson 1972), is offending the audience and questioning their tastes.

This policy, again reminiscent of the immediate and negotiatory character of face-to-face interactions, can be interpreted as a last desperate attempt for communication by means of a "lovers' quarrel" (McHale, 1987: 226): "The existence of a relationship, even of an aggressive one, is better than no relationship at all" (loc.cit.). The metafictional 'aggression' towards the reader can vary in terms of how explicit it becomes: there are cases of - more or less mild - sarcasm, for instance:

> I could astound you with an amount of stunning trivia at this point, if I did not wish to avoid boring myself
>
> (Johnson, 1973: 84)

> ...so how about some sex? That I know you will enjoy: so many commodities testify to the stone certainty of that truth
>
> (loc.cit.)

(Cf. Sukenick's references in both *The Death of the Novel* and in *Up* to the "scenes that sell a novel"). The sarcasm of these examples is directed against audience tastes which have been influenced by the easy aestheticism of mass literature.There are, however, more explicitly aggressive forms of communication with the audience. This is illustrated in the following examples:

> Now that I've got you alone, down here, you bastard, don't you think I'm letting you get away easily, no Sir not your brother
>
> (G[illegible], 1969: unnumbered)

> Why do you want me to tidy up life, to explain? Do you want me to explain? Do you ask of your bookmaker that he explain?
>
> (Johnson, 1973: 41)

> The Reader! You, dogged, uninsultable, print-oriented bastard, it's you I'm addressing, who else...
>
> (Barth, 1968: 127)

The whole context of Barth's *Life-Story* shows that the preceding aggression is ultimately a desperate plea for communication. The narrator is aware of the readers' vital role:

> Because your own author bless and damn you his life is in y our hands?... Don't you think he knows who gives his creatures their lives and deaths?... And can he die until you have no more of him?... Suicide's impossible: he can't kill himself without your help.
>
> (127-128)

3. Beyond the make-believe of storytelling.

The placement of typically oral involvement techniques in selfconscious texts results in their expansion into new discursive forms and functions under the pressure of the new contextual parameters. Both in classic/realistic texts (the term from Barthes, 1972) and in oral narrative, drawing the reader into the storytelling normally aims at the suspension of her disbelief (establishing the make-believe of fiction). Furthermore, it reinforces the *vraisemblance* (verisimilitude) of the sujet.

However, in metafiction, it is in line with the text's structuralized narcissism. Promoting the readers' involvement is an integral part of the whole self-conscious act of creation. This means that the readers are not permitted to enter the text's imagined cosmos as provisional believers (Nelson in Demetz et al, 1968: 173-91). Instead, they are constantly forced to acknowledge the artifice of what they are reading. Self-conscious and intrusive narrators lay bare all the literary conventions, including the "rhetoric of dissimulation as the process of obliterating the fact that the fictional worlds originate in the author's imagination" (Booth, 1961: 153). They thus draw the readers' attention to the status of the stories as artefacts through their assault upon "the boundary between life and art, reality [and fiction]" (Barth, 1969: 129).

The warning "YOU HAVE FALLEN INTO ART - RETURN TO LIFE" (Gass, 1969: 60) is always lurking in the text and even foregrounded in moments of narratorial confession. For instance, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* the narrator suddenly tells the readers that the "story is all imagination" and that the "characters never existed outside [my] own mind" (cf. the analogous statement in Sorrentino, 1971: "These people aren't real. I'm making them up as I go along", quoted in Hutcheon, 1980: 87).

Similarly, Coover starts his *Magic Poker* by making it clear to the readers that everything is being invented by him as Writer - the setting, the plot, the characters, even the reader: "Just as I have invented you, dear reader, while lying here in the afternoon sun..." (1971: 40). Storyteller, tale and told are so interwoven into fiction that the narrator ends up questioning his own ontological status as well: "But the caretaker's son? To tell the truth, I sometimes wonder if it was not he who invented me..." (ibid.: 27).

In such texts, the reader is treated as a critical co-participant in a communal enterprise of questioning the validity and authenticity of literary conventions. This constitutes the complex paradox on which the metafictional *enonciation* is based: texts which are both "narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader" (Hutcheon, 1980: 7) on one hand promote the reader's involvement but on the other hand appeal to her critical detachment. Being both a co- creator and a critic of the text means that the reader is placed both within and outside it.

The new role of the reader in metafiction is interrelated with the new role of the writer. The concept of the inspired oral performer or the omnipotent realistic Author-Creator who puts all the competing voices under his control and favours a single, centralized meaning is abolished in metafiction. *The Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1974) as the divine lone creator leads to the birth of the reader. Put in other words, creating (writing) and receiving (reading) are projected in metafiction as two aspects of the same effort (Hutcheon, 1980: 145).

4. The Metafictional Interaction and the Orality/Literacy Distinction

Any thorough approach to the metafictional discursive situation inevitably leads to consideration of the orality/literacy distinction. The neo-oral cast (exploitation of techniques typically met in oral contexts) of metafiction is characterized, by Ong, as an instance of secondary orality (Ong, 1982: 175ff).

Secondary orality, a product of the electronic age of literacy, resembles primary or preliterate orality, in that it suggests modes of interaction that are close to the oral ones (idem). However, the two cannot completely coincide, as secondary orality is always dependent upon writing and print. It favours open-system paradigms, that is, interactional (transactional) and process-oriented systems (op.cit.).

Open-system paradigms characterize the art forms of the postmodernist era. Thus the world of metafiction is not a world in isolation. Alongside the new reader of metafiction, we have the new viewer of postmodernist television (see Wyner, 1986 in Appignanesi: 54-58) or the new viewer of postmodernist cinema (e.g. Fellini taking the viewer to the *cinecitta* and placing her in front of the process of film creation, Woody Allen erasing the ontological boundaries between the cinematic world and the real world of the audience in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, etc.).

Secondary orality is a very helpful notion for contextualizing metafictional discourse. However, when it comes to a stylistic approach to this discourse with reference to orality/literacy, terms which imply a rigid distinction between the two should be

avoided. Unlike previous research in the orality/literacy tradition which emphasized the functional, situational and stylistic differences between the oral and the written mode, current discussions of the issue tend to posit an oral/literate continuum to replace the dichotomy. The point usually made is that the stylistic choices typical of each modality can neither form clear-cut categories nor present themselves as isomorphic with orality and literacy *per se*.

Tannen, one of the main representatives of this approach, "suggests that many of the differences between spoken and written language that have been pointed out in previous work result not from spoken vs. written modes themselves but rather from the communicative goals of [the various] discourse types" (Luetkemeyer et al. 1984: 281). She also claims that "strategies that have been associated with orality grow out of emphasis on interpersonal involvement between speaker/writer and audience, and strategies that have been associated with literacy grow out of focus on content" (loc.cit.). Thus the differences observed to date between spoken and written discourse reflect relative focus on involvement. Normally the higher the degree of involvement, the closer it is to the oral end of the continuum of the oral/literate strategies, but not necessarily so (Tannen 1982).

According to Tannen, "written fiction, as opposed to other types of written language, uses strategies that have been associated with oral tradition: that is, it builds upon the immediacy function of spoken language - 'imageability' and 'involvement'" (Tannen, 1980: 214 quoted by Beaman, 1984: 48).

Linking the discussion of this paper to Tannen's framework, we could explain metafictional discourse in terms of "relative focus on involvement" (loc.cit.). If written fiction on the whole shows a high focus on involvement, metafiction in particular can be characterised as the par excellence "involvement-focused" case of fiction.

This approach to discourse types in terms of relative focus on involvement offers an interesting insight into the different genres and their stylistic features. It can also yield interesting implications for the teaching of literature on the whole and specifically of metafiction. The involvement-focused discourse of metafiction, analysed in a classroom context, could serve as a starting point for increasing the students' awareness of the differences among genres as regards their interpersonal function.

Viewing discourse as product or process and as reciprocal or non reciprocal (Cook, 1989:56ff)[7] can form a basis for a typology of different discourse types as a function of their degree of contextualization[8] and of the relation they attempt to establish with the addressee. Provided these distinctions are treated as a cline rather than clear-cut categories, they could also provide the students with guidelines for composing texts. The principle should be that the desirable and/or appropriate focus on involvement for a certain text defines the complex of stylistic devices exploited in it. In other words, the final "recipient design", i.e. "the shaping of a text according to the orientation and sensitivity to its addressee" (Burton in Carter, 1982: 207), heavily depends on its communicative purposes.

The classroom context is not the only domain in which the involvement-focused character of metafiction can serve as a point of departure for discussion and research. Metafictional discourse can also employ the attention of the stylisticians who work in the now fashionable area of Stylistics, that of linking the structure and content of literary texts to their ideological effect.[9] What is of particular interest there is the intratextual functioning of the metafictional discursive modes in relation to their potential extratextual significance. The starting point is to treat the metafictional quest for both the

reader's involvement and her critical detachment as an instance of anti- authoritative discourse - in other words, as an attempt to problematize the relation between discourse and power.[10]

The new aestheticism of metafiction can be summarized in the abolition of the scheme Author (Dominant) - Reader (Dominated) (Hutcheon, 1980:161). The author as the sole producing power is seriously questioned, because "there is something arrogant...in the notion of a man setting the universe in order" (Cohen, 1966:95, quoted in Hutcheon, ibid.:157). The ultimate aim of this discursive structuring is to dictate a certain interpretation, that is, to evoke a certain reader response. A sociopolitically oriented stylistic account of metafiction would claim that this is the point where the new type of reader and reading that metafiction encourages can be related to ideological considerations. This means that it would be expected and/or desired that the reader's re-examining and re-evaluating of her relationship to the text and its addressee will lead her to re- examine and re-evaluate her relationship to the cultural codes and systems of the world outside it. The adoption of this view presupposes agreement with the treatment of reading as an inherently political act which involves interpretation, creation and action in both literary and political terms (Hutcheon, 1984: 161).

Acknowledgment

The author of the above paper is supported by the Greek State Scholarships Foundation (S.S.F.).

Notes

1. 'Sjuzet' or 'sujet' is "one of the terms introduced into the theory of narrative by the Russian Formalists in the 1920s (notably Shklovsky 1925). For any narrative there are two levels: the surface level with the actual sequence of events as narrated (sujet) and the deep level, the abstract chronological or logical ordering possible of events (fabula)" (Wales, 1989: 169).

2. 'Mimetic' and 'diegetic' are rhetorical terms derived from Plato and Aristotle. They refer to two distinct modes of narration: narration which effaces the signs of the addresser and the addressee and narration which foregrounds them and the whole act of 'enonciation', correspondingly. Comparable are the distinctions story/discourse (histoire/discours) and showing/telling; for a discussion of these terms, see Wales 1989. Here the phrase 'diegetic self-consciousness' refers to the metafictional texts' awareness of the act of narration and its conventions.

3. For support of this view, see Butler 1980; Hutcheon 1984, 1988, 1989; McHale 1987; Scholes 1980; Waugh 1984.

4. 'Involvement' here refers to the promotion of the reader's participatory engagement in the text. In Chafe's theory accounting for the differences between spoken and written language, involvement as opposed to detachment is one of the two qualities typically associated with spoken language, (the other one being fragmentation as opposed to integration: see Chafe, 1982). Chafe distinguishes between three kinds of involvement: involvement of the speaker/writer with himself, that is, ego involvement; involvement of the speaker/writer with the hearer/reader, that is, concern for the dynamics of interaction with another person; and involvement of the speaker/writer with the subject matter, that is, an ongoing

personal commitment to what is being talked about (ibid.: 116). The present paper mainly focuses on the second type of involvement and the ways in which it is actualized in metafiction.

5. For a discussion on the function of "you" in discourse analysis, see Montgomery, 1988: 188ff.

6. 'Metacommunication' in Babcock is one dimension of 'metanarration', i.e. the devices that comment on the narrative itself. From the network of these devices metacommunication covers the "social interactional elements of the discourse" (Bauman, 1986:99). More or less explicit references to the storytelling interaction bridge the gap between the narrated event and the storytelling event (ibid.: 100).

7. According to Cook, a reciprocal discourse is one in which "there is ... a potential for interaction,...and the sender can monitor reception and adjust to it" (1989: 60). He also claims that the reciprocal/non-reciprocal type of discourse forms a cline and that it cuts across the distinction between speech and writing. In this cline metafiction would be placed, as the discussion has tried to prove, towards the reciprocal end.

8. The more a discourse is dependent on the contribution of the addressee (e.g. supply of background information) to the process of sense-making, the more contextualized it is considered to be.

9. This tendency of Stylistics goes by various names: Political Criticism, Radical Stylistics, Critical Linguistics, etc.

10. The term 'discourse' is used here in the sense of "the set of relations between two parties engaged in a communicative activity" (Secula, 1982: 184, quoted in Hutcheon, 1988: 186). In this sense discourse is responsible for the creation, transmission and/or reproduction of social values and ideologies.

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